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SUBJECT: DAS DUGAN MEETS WITH PARTY, PRACTITIONERS ON RELIGION

1. (SBU) Summary: During November 23 meetings in Hanoi, a Communist Party official told DRL DAS Elizabeth Dugan that the Party upholds freedom of religion in Vietnam and stressed that the country's thriving religious life is proof of this. However, the official said that Protestantism has been very disruptive in some parts of Vietnam, causing local officials to be prejudiced against it. A leader of the officially recognized Buddhist denomination claimed that Vietnam has complete religious freedom, something foreigners "do not understand." A Catholic bishop was less positive, documenting the imbalances in permitted activities between northern and southern Vietnam and expressing disappointment at the new Ordinance on Religion. End Summary.

Party Remains Suspicious of Protestants

2. (SBU) Trinh Xuan Gioi, Vice Chairman of the Mass Mobilization Commission of the Communist Party, began his November 23 meeting with DAS Dugan by explaining the role and activities of the Commission. As a component of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Mass Mobilization Commission studies ways in which the government can enact the guidance of the Party in a manner that reaches every citizen. The Commission focuses on social groups, including workers, women, intellectuals, minorities and religious organizations. (Note: The Commission is the body through which the Party oversees most social groups. End note.) Gioi proceeded to a familiar recitation of the ways in which freedom of religion is upheld in Vietnam. Freedom of belief was established by a 1955 law on religious affairs and recently upheld in a Party resolution. Responding to this resolution, the National Assembly issued the new Ordinance on Religion, which further guarantees religious freedom. Today there are six major religions in Vietnam and over 21,000 places of worship, including one in almost every village. Despite the nation's poverty, many churches and temples have been renovated and religious festivals are widely celebrated. Religious organizations are free to organize and meet; for example, the Hoa Hao Buddhist organization recently held its second congress in Southern Vietnam, Gioi noted.

3. (SBU) Responding to DAS Dugan's question, Gioi said that the Party supports the social programs that religious groups carry out. Religious organizations have opened nursery schools, churches provide scholarships for students and religious workers operate leprosy centers. The Party and Government consider these to be positive actions. Gioi noted that there are some areas in which local authorities have not allowed practitioners to build or renovate churches, but added that these are unusual instances and that the Commission is working to implement more broadly the Party's goals.

4. (SBU) Addressing the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Gioi said that this organization and most of its leaders peacefully united with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) after unification of the country, and thus ceased to exist as an independent body. Current UBCV activists Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do have not followed the rest of the UBCV's leadership in joining the VBS.

5. (SBU) Turning to Protestantism, Gioi said that the preaching of this faith is a "shock" to many people. Some Protestant preachers have said that the aim of their religion is to establish independent Dega and Hmong nations. As such, local authorities have come to view the religion as a "political scheme." Preachers also pressure and intimidate people to join Protestantism, attempt to divide families and force adherents to remove their traditional home altars. Especially in mountainous areas, Protestantism has led to family divisions and social conflict, and, as a result, some local officials have become prejudiced against the religion. Making a historical comparison, Gioi said that when Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam during the Nguyen dynasty, it was also a "shock," and feudal leaders

banned the religion and executed many of its followers. "This was unacceptable," Gioi admitted. In southern Vietnam, "80 percent of Protestants follow religious life normally," Gioi specified, and only a portion the Protestants active in the Central Highlands have taken advantage of the religion to advance "political goals." "Where worship is normal, authorities must recognize congregations; however, where there are problems, authorities will delay recognition," Gioi said.

16. (SBU) DAS Dugan said that, in the United States, religions are considered to be grounded in doctrine and not to have political motives. If religious leaders commit improper actions, however, they are dealt with through the justice system in a transparent manner. She added that while it is clear that there are a great many practitioners and opportunities for worship in Vietnam, the detention of individuals for peacefully practicing their faith undermines all of Vietnam's efforts to highlight these freedoms to foreign observers.

Official Buddhists - Situation Rosy

17. (SBU) In a separate meeting November 23, the Venerable Thich Thanh Tu, Rector of the Buddhist Academy in Hanoi and Vice President of the Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), told DAS Dugan that, "through peace and war, Vietnam's Buddhists have always been united." Buddhism has been practiced in Vietnam for 2,000 years and, without freedom of religion in the country, this would not have been possible. Ho Chi Minh himself issued an order guaranteeing religious freedom. The new Ordinance on Religion reiterates this, and the "people are very happy about it." The Ordinance also serves to clarify provisions that uphold this freedom. It was issued for foreign observers who do not understand that freedom of religion exists in Vietnam, Thich Thanh Tu claimed.

18. (SBU) DAS Dugan inquired about the relationship between the VBS and the UBCV, as well as about the reason why UBCV leader Thich Quang Do was stopped from traveling to visit Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang. Thich Thanh Tu said he sees the two UBCV leaders as the VBS's "religious partners," and added that "there is no division between us." He said the GVN has been "compassionate" towards the two UBCV leaders, with Party and Government leaders visiting Thich Huyen Quang when he was in the hospital in Hanoi, as well as calling upon him in his temple in Binh Dinh Province. Thich Thanh Tu said he had personally visited Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh, and, upon hearing that he had recently fallen ill, planned to invite him to Hanoi for treatment. He did not know why Thich Quang Do would be blocked from visiting Thich Huyen Quang, but suggested that Do's doctors might have prevented him from traveling due to his heart condition.

Catholics - More Restrictions in the North

19. (SBU) Joined by the Ambassador, DAS Dugan began her November 23 meeting with Ngo Quang Kiet (protect), Bishop of Lang Son Diocese and Apostolic Administrator of the Hanoi Diocese, by noting that she had met with Archbishop Man in Ho Chi Minh City two days before. Bishop Kiet said that the situation of the Church in northern and southern Vietnam is different "in almost every field." The Diocese of Ho Chi Minh City has roughly 500,000 faithful and 500 priests to minister to them, while Hanoi has 350,000 believers but only 60 priests. The ability to train priests is much greater in the south, with each diocese allowed ten to 20 students per seminary class, while in the north, only five to ten students are allowed. After complaining to the GVN, the Church has been allowed 11 students per diocese in this year's Hanoi seminary class. In every diocese in the south, churches run nursery schools, while in the north, this is only allowed in Hanoi. Similarly, in the south the Church runs a number of health clinics and organizes doctors to provide health care in the countryside, while only one Catholic clinic exists in the north. When DAS Dugan inquired about the reason for such inconsistencies, Kiet said that "we are confused about this and have complained to the Government, but they did not answer us."

10. (SBU) Turning to the new Ordinance on Religion, Bishop Kiet said that the document "demonstrates the good will of the Government." He noted that the Government solicited a broad range of opinions in the drafting process, but said the Church was disappointed that these opinions do not seem to be reflected in the final version. The Ordinance has some "new points," but the Church also has many reservations, and it is not the "complete renovation" of the issue they had hoped for. Bishop Kiet said that he had not had a chance to comment on the draft of the implementing regulations of the Ordinance as he had been away when the Committee for Religious Affairs held a discussion session in Hanoi. However, the Bishop's Council has requested that the

regulations provide better definitions of "ambiguous terms" such as "registration" and "notification." The Ambassador inquired as to whether the Church could now transfer priests from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, which is seemingly allowed under the new Ordinance. Bishop Kiet said they had not tried this recently and expressed his belief that the Ordinance is intended to allow transfers of priests within the same diocese only. Finally, responding to the Ambassador's question, Bishop Kiet said that proselytization is not a problem in large cities, but is more difficult in mountainous areas.

11. (U) DAS Dugan has cleared this cable.
MARINE